

MAMI

Miami Art Museum



Kerry James Marshall

One True Thing

Meditations on Black Aesthetics

February 6 – April 25, 2004

KERRY JAMES MARSHALL IS BEST KNOWN FOR HIS MONUMENTAL FIGURATIVE PAINTINGS REMINISCENT OF TRADITIONAL EUROPEAN HISTORY AND NARRATIVE PAINTING. HIS SUBJECTS STEM FROM HIS EXPERIENCES AS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN, WHICH HE SAYS ARE ROOTED IN THE SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY OF HIS UPBRINGING: “YOU CAN’T BE BORN IN BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA, IN 1955 AND GROW UP IN SOUTH CENTRAL [LOS ANGELES] NEAR THE BLACK PANTHERS HEADQUARTERS AND NOT FEEL LIKE YOU’VE GOT SOME KIND OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY. YOU CAN’T MOVE TO WATTS IN 1963 AND NOT SPEAK ABOUT IT. THAT DETERMINED A LOT OF WHERE MY WORK WAS GOING TO GO.” ¹

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kerry James Marshall realized he wanted to be an artist at a very early age. He pinpoints the defining moment as the day he was allowed to look through his kindergarten teacher’s scrapbook of photographs, Christmas cards, valentines and images from magazines and books. It was something she made available only to the best-behaved students. Marshall remembers looking at that scrapbook and saying: “That’s what I want to do; I want to make pictures like these.”

From that moment on he was focused. He found inspiration in everything from comic books to his great-great grandmother’s illustrated Bible. During the 1960s he watched John Nagy’s *Learn to Draw* TV program and learned how to draw almost anything by reducing it to simple shapes: cones, circles and spheres. In the fifth or sixth grade he went on a field trip to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It was his first visit to an art museum and he says: “Once I learned how to get there on my own, I haunted the place.”

The summer after seventh grade he took a drawing class at the Otis Art Institute, where he saw drawings from a book called *Images of Dignity: The Drawings of Charles White*. ² “Until then,” he says, “I had never thought much about whether there was a difference between black artists and white artists. As far as I was concerned, there were only artists. ...But now I thought about an artist being someone like me. *Images of Dignity* was a revelation to me. The drawings were all of black people, done with tremendous skill and expertise.” Marshall later took a class with White at Otis while he was still in high school. Meeting White

influenced the direction he would take as an artist. “If my teacher Charles White said anything really important to me, it was that you have to worry about making the best paintings and the best drawings you can, and that the ideas will take care of themselves.”

Before entering Otis full-time as a junior in college, Marshall remembers experimenting with all sorts of materials, techniques and subject matter. At this point he was “single-mindedly focused on learning how to do things.” He says, “it says something about my obsessions with art history and process and the mastery exemplified by artists like Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael.”

“I keep going back to artists like Rembrandt or Raphael. When I look at those paintings, first I see the tonal relationships, the colors, the composition. That then directs me to the larger issues in the work: passion, the heroic, the sublime – life-and-death issues. The characters in those paintings could have been anybody. The overall theme of the work went beyond who was being depicted. I always wanted to do pictures with black people in them that did the same thing: where you recognized who the figures were, and then quickly went beyond that to much larger issues that implicated more than just the people represented. I always wanted my work to operate on that scale. I never wanted to collapse into parochialism. I didn’t want it to be just about what happened in the black community. It’s parochial if people aren’t able to imagine anything beyond the blackness of those figures.” ³

¹ Kerry James Marshall, Terrie Sultan and Arthur Jafa, *Kerry James Marshall* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Incorporated, 2000), 113.

² Charles White (1918-1979) - African American social realist known for his skill as a draftsman and his ability to convey emotion in heroic drawings of African Americans.

³ Marshall, Sultan and Jafa, 66.



ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

In 1998, in conjunction with his major solo traveling exhibition organized by the Renaissance Society in Chicago, Marshall painted *Mementos*, a series of large-scale works commemorating political and cultural heroes who died during the 1960s, including civil rights movement icons John F. Kennedy (1917–1963); Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) and Robert Kennedy (1925–1968). For Marshall, the 2002 sentencing of former Ku Klux Klansman Bobby Frank Cherry in the 1963 bombing of the Birmingham church in which four African-American girls were killed signaled the end of his artistic chronicle of the civil rights movement.

The last painting in the *Mementos* series is included in this exhibition, the first significant showing of Marshall's work in five years. Installed at the entrance to the gallery, *Memento #5 2002*, literally and metaphorically closes the curtain on this period in Marshall's work and marks the beginning of his exploration of black aesthetics.

The term “black aesthetics” first emerged in the 1960s within the Black Power movement as a way to raise awareness for black rights, foster black cultural pride and develop strategies for African Americans to participate more actively in the mainstream of U.S. society. The Black Arts movement, an outgrowth of the Black Power movement, took the concept further, creating a set of standards for music and literature from an African-American perspective.

Marshall extends this concept into the visual arts by drawing upon the rich layering of language, music and art characteristic of black expression. Like a jazz composer superimposing multiple rhythms and harmonies, Marshall mixes a myriad of sources to highlight the uniqueness of black culture and to advance new interpretations of traditional Western art forms. According to Marshall, he has tried to “make a visual equivalent to the idiosyncratic, haunting music of Robert Johnson and Howling Wolf and blues that functions and resonates the same way as a musical form does.”¹

The subtitle *One True Thing* refers to Marshall's concept of creating new work in each medium: painting, sculpture, printmaking, video photography and installation. It is also meant to be ironic – as black aesthetics cannot be defined simply as “one thing.” The result is an installation comprised of separate elements that together can be read like a book or soundtrack, suggesting the passage of time embedded in a sense of place.

In the first section of the exhibition, Marshall reflects on historical events and cultural traditions that have shaped the lives of African Americans today. Works such as *Wake* and *Untitled (Boat)* refer to the Middle Passage – transatlantic voyages between Africa and the Americas during the slave trade. There are also works that Marshall describes as sentimental and romantic odes to Africa as a source of black culture and creative inspiration, such as *Africa Restored* and *Africa (Yin/Yang)*. Other works such as *SOB, SOB* present a wistful yearning for pre-colonial Africa or, as in the case of *Vignette*, suggest that the Afrocentric desire to return to an original state of harmony with nature is naively idealistic.

Alongside these works honoring blackness, Marshall places works he sees as topical meditations on the many challenges in the U.S. surrounding race, discrimination and affirmative action. *Dailies* is a series of drawings in newspaper-comic format that continue Marshall's *Rythm Mastr* series in which an urban superhero battles the forces of evil by calling forth and harnessing the power of ancient Yoruba deities. Set against the backdrop of the fast-track demolition of public housing by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), called Plan for Transformation, *Dailies* tells an epic tale of the struggle between tradition and modernity in African-American culture amid gang violence and social upheaval.

Other works in the exhibition present a range of vision and perception – from unconscious blindness to hallucination to awakened consciousness. The massive painting

7am Sunday Morning is a view of South Side Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood as seen from Marshall's studio. Once known as the Black Metropolis, a vibrant community of black-owned businesses, Bronzeville has suffered a fate similar to Miami's own Overtown neighborhood. Marshall has made this reality difficult to discern by including an optical effect resulting from a glare from the sun that bathes the scene in a spectrum of color and dazzling light.

To comment on the lack of tender or private moments in media representations of African Americans, Marshall uses a minimalist painting technique of juxtaposing warm and cool tones of a single color to simultaneously reveal and conceal the figures in *Black Painting*. He also achieves this affect in his photographs, *Black Xmas* and *Black Artist*, taken in black light. In *Color Blind Test* he ironically juxtaposes the idea of racial "color blindness" with the concept that being color blind is a physical deficiency.

In both Miami and Chicago, Marshall extended the exhibition to include works by artists to open the dialogue about black aesthetics and to create a communal relationship among artists. The two South Florida-based artists featured in the exhibition at MAM are Adler Guerrier and Onajide Shabaka. By focusing on an idea – the meaning of black aesthetics – as the basis for the exhibition, Marshall has challenged notions about how exhibitions are traditionally organized, as well as art-world hierarchy and curatorial practices within art institutions.

In works such as *Ladder of Success* and *Sixteen Bar Blues*, Marshall synthesizes recognizable Western art-historical styles with imagery associated with the African-American experience. Here Marshall is making an obvious "riff" on minimalist works by Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt by incorporating references to blues music and principles of Kwanzaa to infuse meaning in otherwise impersonal and formal works.

Adopting and adapting these styles is important to Marshall. From his perspective, "If there's no clearly articulated philosophy of a black aesthetic that can function competitively against what we see as a European model of aesthetic excellence...you've got to demonstrate...an understanding of the Western European tradition at the same time that

you're trying to create a new alternative tradition or aesthetic of your own."²

In a recent lecture at MAM, Marshall noted that the history of American art lacks the presence of major contributions by African Americans yet the history of music in this country is indebted to the contributions of African-American musicians. By embracing the ambitious undertaking of creating new work in all media, Marshall seeks new ways to articulate ideas and create new paradigms and ways of seeing. This, according to Marshall, is what the artists who have shaped the history of art have accomplished, and what he aspires to do as an artist.

Lorie Mertes
Curator

1 Kerry James Marshall, unpublished interview by Julieanna L. Richardson, 2001, for The HistoryMakers, a non-profit organization in Chicago that compiles oral histories of prominent African Americans.

2 Ibid.

MAM Gallery Notes are based on the artist's lectures at MAM and on the Museum of Contemporary Art's *Kerry James Marshall* Gallery Guide compiled by Tricia Van Eck and Stephanie Williams.

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COVER: Kerry James Marshall painting *Memento #5*. **INSIDE RIGHT:** Kerry James Marshall, *7am Sunday Morning*, (detail) 2003. Acrylic on canvas banner, 120 x 216 inches. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Joseph and Jory Shapiro Fund by exchange. Photos ©Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.